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## What are we **learning about...?**

LEA involvement in school networks

# Leadership and sustainability

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Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

# Leadership and sustainability

**“ Networks offer the possibility of new patterns of leadership - more lateral and more distributed - they offer new possibilities for LEAs and schools to engage in co-leadership. ”**

Through an exploration of contemporary ideas about leadership and an examination of what I define as the eight elements of sustainability, this article addresses in particular, school and network level issues and, in turn, their implications for new types of co-dependency relationships between networks and LEAs.

One question that this think piece seeks to answer is: **why should LEAs support networks of schools?**

A key part of the answer is that school networks help to develop more and more leaders who can think and act with the bigger picture in mind, thereby changing the context within which people work. They go beyond individual and team learning to organisational learning and system change. A second question is: **how can school networks and LEAs facilitate learning opportunities and experiences for their leaders that will actually increase their ability to identify and take into account system context?**

This article challenges LEAs involved in school networks to develop strategies, training opportunities, situated learning experiences and day-to-day actions within networks of schools that will develop these 'system thinkers in action'. This, it is argued, is the key to better organisational and system performance, to 'going to scale' and to enhancing the conditions for sustainability, where a commitment to simultaneous tri-level change is required in order to achieve system transformation at school (and network) level, district (or LEA) level and at the level of national policy. □

## New leadership

**Leadership** is to this decade what standards-based reform was to the 1990s. We are at a critical juncture in large-scale reform where we need to maintain and extend the gains in literacy and numeracy and at the same time, go deeper into more fundamental reform in the educational system as a whole.

To go further we need to develop a new kind of leadership – what I call 'system thinkers in action'. These are leaders who work intensely in their own schools or LEAs, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture. To change organisations and systems will require leaders who gain experience in linking to other parts of the system. These leaders in turn, must help develop other leaders with similar characteristics. In this sense, the main mark of a school head, for example, is not the impact he or she has on the bottom line of student achievement at the end of their tenure, but rather how many good leaders they leave behind who can go even further.

The question, then, is: **how can we practically develop system thinkers in action? Some do exist, but how do we get them in numbers? How do we get the critical mass needed for system breakthrough?**

I know of no programme of development, in the UK or elsewhere, that has actually developed leaders to become greater, practical systems thinkers. Until we do this we cannot expect the school system to become transformed. The key to doing this is to link systems thinking with sustainability.

I define sustainability as the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose.

The question in this article is: **how can school networks and LEAs provide training and experiences for their leaders that will actually increase their ability to identify and take into account system context?** If this can be done it would make it more likely that systems, not just individuals, could be changed.

Heifetz (2003) makes a distinction between technical problems (for which we know the answer) and adaptive challenges (for which solutions lie outside our current repertoire). Developing systems thinkers is an adaptive challenge. The key to moving forward is to enable leaders to experience and become more effective at leading organisations toward sustainability.

### Eight elements of sustainability

- 1 Public service with a moral purpose.**
- 2 Commitment to changing context at all levels.**
- 3 Lateral capacity-building through networks.**
- 4 New vertical relationships that are co-dependent, encompassing both capacity-building and accountability.**
- 5 Deep learning.**
- 6 Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results.**
- 7 Cyclical energising.**
- 8 The long lever of leadership.**

## New leadership

### 1 Public service with a moral purpose

In examining moral purpose (*Fullan, 2003*) I talked about how it must transcend the individual to become an organisation and system quality, in which collectivities were committed to pursuing moral purpose in all of their core activities.

I define moral purpose in three ways with respect to schools:

- 1 Commitment to raising the bar and closing the gap of student achievement.
- 2 Treating people with respect – which is not to say low expectations.
- 3 Orientation to improving the environment, including other schools in the LEA.

#### Pause for thought...?

#### Pause for thought...?

What might be the LEAs role in brokering and facilitating schools to form and to use networks that are morally purposeful?

#### Pause for thought...?

How might the lateral capacity of networks be used to support the most vulnerable schools and students?

### 2 Commitment to changing context at all levels

Changing whole systems means changing the entire context within which people work. Researchers are fond of observing that context is everything, usually in reference to why a particular innovation succeeded in one situation but not in another. Well, if context is everything, we must focus directly on how it can be changed for the better. This is not as impossible as it sounds, although it will take time and cumulative effort. The good news is, that once it is under way, it has self-generating powers to go further.

The question is: **can we identify strategies that will indeed change in a desirable direction the contexts that affect us?**

On a small scale, (*Gladwell, 2000*) has already identified context as a key tipping point: '*the power of context says that what really matters is the little things*' (p 150). And if you want to change people's behaviour '*you need to create a community around them, where these new beliefs could be practical, expressed and nurtured*' (p 173).

#### Pause for thought...?

#### Pause for thought...?

Can networks contribute to providing this change of context – and how can LEAs help to support it?

#### Pause for thought...?

New contexts require new accountabilities. How can LEAs support networks in the introduction of new lateral accountabilities such as collaborative review or peer supported school self-evaluation?

## New leadership

### 3 Lateral capacity-building through networks

The most systematic strategy-driven use of networks and collaboratives is evolving in England, partly as a response to the limitations of 'informed prescription'. Many of the new network strategies are being developed by the National College of School Leadership (NCSL). There are a number of obvious benefits from lateral strategies see (Hargreaves, 2003, *Education Epidemic*), but school networks are not ends in themselves. They must be assessed in terms of the impact they have on changing the cultures of schools and LEAs.

So the question is, **how do potential good ideas get out of networks, so to speak, and into focused and sustained implementation in schools?**

There are a number of obvious benefits from the lateral strategies used in school networks (Hargreaves, 2003).

#### People learn best from peers if...

- Sufficient opportunity exists for ongoing, purposeful exchange.
- Motivation and ownership at local level is deepened – a key ingredient for sustainability of effort and engagement.
- Leadership is developed and mobilised in many quarters.
- The system is designed to foster, develop and disseminate innovative practices that work.

#### However, networks, per se, are not a panacea and do have drawbacks...

- Too many networks might create clutter rather than focus.
- They may exchange beliefs and opinions rather than quality knowledge.
- They are usually outside the line of formal authority and accountability.

#### Pause for thought...?



#### Pause for thought...?

What roles might there be for LEAs in helping knowledge and innovation to travel from one network to another?

#### Pause for thought...?

How can LEAs best support peer-to-peer learning within networks?

### 4 New vertical co-dependent relationships

We know that problems have to be solved locally. Solutions rely, at least in part, on the users themselves and their capacity to take school responsibility for positive outcomes. The question is, **what is going to motivate people to seek positive outcomes and how are people and groups to be held accountable?**

The answer is a mixture of collaboration and networks, on the one hand, and what David Miliband calls 'intelligent accountability' on the other. Networks and other professional learning communities do build in a strong, but not complete, measure of accountability. As such communities interact around given problems, they generate better practices, shared commitment and accountability to peers.

It will be difficult to get the balance of accountability right in terms of vertical authority – too much direction demotivates people, too little permits drift, or worse.

To address this problem we need to re-introduce a strategy that has been around for at least 20 years, namely, self-evaluation. In the past, self-evaluation has been touted as an alternative to top-down assessment. In fact, we need to re-conceive self-evaluation and use it as a 'both/and' solution.

#### Pause for thought...?



#### Pause for thought...?

What might the LEAs role be in supporting school-to-school self-evaluation strategies within networks?

#### Pause for thought...?

Networks offer new possibilities for LEAs and schools to engage in co-leadership. How can LEA officers work with network leaders to engage in joint problem solving?

## New leadership

### 5 Deep learning

Sustainability by our definition requires continuous improvement, adaptation and collective problem-solving in the face of complex challenges that keep arising. As (Heifetz, 2003) says, adaptive work 'demands learning', 'demands experimentation', and 'difficult conversations... species evolve whereas cultures learn' (p 75).

Deep learning means collaborative cultures of inquiry that alter the culture of learning in the organisation away from dysfunctional and non-relationships, towards the daily development of a culture that can solve difficult or adaptive problems.

The curriculum for doing this is contained in Kegan and Lahey's seven languages for transformation and in Perkins' developmental leadership, which seeks the exchange of good ideas, and fosters the cohesiveness of the group (Kegan & Lahey, 2001; Perkins, 2003). Unfortunately, poor knowledge-exchange and weak social cohesion is more likely to occur because it is easier than trying to create the more complex progressive cultures. Be that as it may, the solution is to develop more and more leaders who can help shape school system cultures in these directions.

#### Pause for thought...?

#### Pause for thought...?

*In what ways could there be a brokerage role for LEAs in supporting school-to-school enquiry within networks?*

#### Pause for thought...?

*How can LEAs adapt and learn alongside schools using the processes of enquiry and deep learning?*

### 6 Dual commitment to short-term and long-term results

Of course, short-term progress can be accomplished at the expense of the mid to long term (win the battle, lose the war), but it doesn't have to be this way. What I am advocating is that organisations and LEAs in particular, set targets and take action to obtain early results, intervene in situations of poor performance, all the while investing

in the eight sustainability, capacity-building elements described in this article. Over time, the system gets stronger and fewer severe problems occur, as they are pre-empted by corrective action sooner rather than later. The shorter-term results are necessary to build trust with the public for longer-term investments.

#### Pause for thought...?

#### Pause for thought...?

*What role do LEAs have in helping networks to set targets and to achieve and publicise short-term successes?*

#### Pause for thought...?

*In what ways might there be a role for the LEA in setting the strategic vision and the climate for long-term change?*

## New leadership

### 7 Cyclical energising

We have seen achievement in primary literacy and mathematics improve over a five-year period, only to reach a plateau and level off. It may be related to teacher burnout, but this is not likely to be the main explanation. It is not hard work that tires us out, as much as it is negative work. People are still putting in a lot of energy to maintain the same higher-level performance represented by the new plateau. If people were burning out, performance would likely decline.

A more likely explanation is that the set of strategies that brought initial success are not the ones – not powerful enough – to take us to higher levels. In such a case, we would expect the best learning organisations to investigate, learn, experiment and develop better solutions. While this new adaptive work is going on we would not expect achievement scores to rise in a linear fashion, and any external assessment scheme that demanded annual yearly progress would be barking up the wrong tree.

#### Pause for thought...?

What role might an LEA have in mediating between national expectations of year-on-year progress and addressing more local issues?

#### Pause for thought...?

In what ways might there be a role for the LEA, in setting a culture of optimism and energy that will support networks to investigate, learn and experiment together?

#### Pause for thought...?

### 8 The long lever of leadership

Firstly, if a system is to be mobilised in the direction of sustainability, leadership at all levels must be the primary engine. Secondly, the main work of leaders is to help put into place the previous seven elements – all seven simultaneously feeding on each other. To do this we need a system laced with leaders who are trained to think in bigger terms and to act in ways that affect larger parts

of the system as a whole – system thinkers in action. In my upcoming book there are many examples of the kind of leadership development we need at the school, LEA and system levels to produce more of the leadership we are talking about here (*Fullan, in press*), including one example of a whole LEA approach to network communities. □

#### Pause for thought...?

Networks offer the possibility of new patterns of leadership – more lateral and more distributed. How could the LEA have a role in supporting and developing such leadership?

#### Pause for thought...?

Where are the system thinkers in action within the LEA and how will you enable their involvement in learning networks?

#### Pause for thought...?

## End piece

**The purpose** of this article is not to provide just an analysis of the problem. It is to challenge us to develop strategies, training, experiences and day-to-day actions within the culture of the organisation whose intent would be to generate more and more leaders who could think and act with the bigger picture in mind. Thus, we change the context within which people work, in order to go beyond individual and team learning to organisational learning and system change. This, it seems to me, is the key to better organisational performance and to enhancing the conditions for sustainability. □

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## Notes

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